**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-005**. **THE DAYSPRING FROM ON HIGH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"78.* *The day-spring from on high hath visited us, 79. To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

*Luke 1:78-79*

As the dawn is ushered in by the notes of birds, so the rising of the Sun of Righteousness was heralded by song, Mary and Zacharias brought their praises and welcome to the unborn Christ, the angels hovered with heavenly music over His cradle, and Simeon took the child in his arms and blessed it. The human members of this choir may be regarded as the last of the psalmists and prophets, and the first of Christian singers. The song of Zacharias, from which my text is taken, is steeped in Old Testament allusions, and redolent of the ancient spirit, but it transcends that. Its early part is purely national, and hails the coming of the Messiah chiefly as the deliverer of Israel from foreign oppressors, though even in it their deliverance is regarded mostly as the means to an end, and the end one very appropriate on the lips of a priestly prophet--viz. sacerdotal service by the whole nation in holiness and righteousness all their days.

But in this latter portion, which is separated from the former by the pathetic, incidental, and slight reference to the singer's own child, the national limits are far surpassed. The song soars above them, and pierces to the very heart and kernel of Christ's work. The dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Nothing deeper, nothing wider, nothing truer about the mission and issue of Christ's coming could be spoken. And thus we have to look at the three things that lie in this text, as bearing upon our conceptions of Christ and His work--the darkness, the dawn, and the directing light.

**I. The darkness.**

Zacharias, as becomes the last of the prophets, and a man whose whole religious life was nourished upon the ancient Scriptures, speaks almost entirely in Old Testament phraseology in this song. And his description of them that sit in darkness and the shadow of deathis taken almost verbally from the great words from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, who speaks, in immediate connection with his prophecy of the coming of the Christ, of the people that walk in darkness and them that dwell, or sit, in the shadow of death, upon whom the light hath shined.

The picture that rises before us is that of a group of travellers benighted, bewildered, huddled together in the dark, afraid to move for fear of pitfalls, precipices, wild beasts, and enemies; and so sighing for the day and compelled to be inactive till it comes. That is the picture of humanity apart from Jesus Christ, a darkness so intense, so tragic, that it is, as it were, the very shadow of the ultimate and essential darkness which is death, and in it men are sitting torpid, unable to find their way and afraid to move.

Now darkness, all the world over, is the emblem of three things--ignorance, impurity, sorrow. And all men who are rent away from Jesus Christ, or on whom His beams have not yet fallen, this text tells us, have that triple curse lying upon them.

Ignorance. Think of what, without Jesus Christ, the world has deemed of the unseen, and of the God, if there be a God, that may inhabit there. He has been to them a great Peradventure, a great Terror, a great Inscrutable, a stone-eyed Fate, a thin, nebulous Nothing, with no emotion, no attributes, no heart, no ear to hear, the nearest approach to nonentity, according to the despairing saying of a master of philosophy, that pure Being is equal to pure Nothing. And if all men do not rise to such heights of melancholy abstraction as that, still how little there is of blessed certainty, how little clearness of conception of a Divine Person that turns to us with love and tenderness in His heart, apart from Christ and His teaching! If you take away from civilised men all the knowledge of God that they owe to Jesus Christ, what have you left? The ladder by which they climbed is kicked away by a great many people nowadays, but it is to Him that they owe the very conceptions in the name of which some of them turn round and deny Him.

Ignorance of God, ignorance of one's own self and of one's deepest duties, and ignorance of that solemn future, the fact of which is plain to most men, but the how of which is such a blank mystery but for Jesus Christ--these things are elements of the darkness that wraps the world. Go to heathendom if you want to see the problem worked out, as to what men know outside of the revelation which culminates in Jesus Christ. And take your own hearts, dear friends who stand aside from that sweet Lord and light of our lives, and ask yourselves, What do I know, with a certainty which is to me as valid, as--yea! more valid than that given by sense and outward perceptions? What do I know of God that I do not owe to Jesus Christ? Nothing. You may guess much, you may hope a little, you may dread a great deal, you may question more than all, but you will know nothing.

Well, then, further, this solemn emblem stands for impurity. And we have only to consult our own hearts to feel how true it is about us all, that we dwell in a region all darkened, if not by the coarse transgressions which men consent to call sins, yet darkened more subtly and oftentimes more hopelessly by the obscuration of pure selfishness and living to myself and by myself. Wherever that comes, it is like the mists that steal up from some poisonous marsh, and shut out stars and sky, and drape the whole country in a melancholy veil. It is white but it is poisonous, it is white but it is darkness all the same. There are other kinds of sin than the sins that break the Ten Commandments; there are other kinds of sin than the sins that the world takes cognisance of. The worst poisons are the tasteless ones, and colourless gases are laden with fatal power. We may walk in a darkness that may be felt, though there be nothing in our lives that men call sin, and little there of which our consciences are as yet educated enough to be ashamed. Rent from God, man lives to himself, and so is sunk in darkness.

And what shall I say about the third of the doleful triad of which this pregnant emblem is the recognised symbol all the world over? Surely, though earth be full of blessing, and life of possibilities of joy, no man travels very far along the road without feeling that the burden of sorrow is a burden that we all have to carry. There are blessings in plenty, there is mirth more than enough. There is the laughterwhich is the crackling of thornsunder a pot. There are plenty of distractions and amusements, blessings more plentiful than hope; but yet the ground tone of every human life, when the first flush of inexperience and novelty has worn off, apart from God, is sadness, conscious of itself sometimes, and driven to all manner of foolish attempts at forgetfulness, unconscious of itself sometimes, and knowing not what is the disease of which it languishes. There it is, like some persistent minor in a great piece of music, wailing on through all the embroidery and lightsomeness of the cheerfuller and loftier notes. Every heart knoweth its own bitterness, and every heart has a bitterness of its own to know.

I do not understand how it is that men who have no religion in them can bear their own sorrows and see their neighboursand not go mad. Sometimes the world seems to me to be moving round its central sun with a doleful atmosphere of sighs wherever it goes, and all the mirth and stir and bustle are but like a thin crust of grass with flowers upon it, cast across the sulphurous depths of some volcano that may slumber for a while, but is there all the same.

Brother! you and I, away from Jesus Christ, have to face the certainties of ignorance, of sin, of sorrow--ignorance unenlightened, sin unconquered, sorrow uncomforted.

And then comes the other tragic, and yet most picturesque emblem in the representation here: They sit in darkness. Yes! what can they do, poor creatures? They know not where to go. The light has left them, inactivity is a necessity. And so, with folded hands, they wish for the day, or try to forget the night by lighting some little torch of their own that only serves to make darkness visible, and dies all too soon, leaving them to lie down in sorrow.

But, you say, What nonsense! Inactivity! look at the fierce energy of life in our Western lands. Well, grant it all, there may be plenty of material activity attendant upon inward stagnation and torpor. But, again, I would like to ask how much of the most godless, commercial, artistic, intellectual activity of so-called civilised and Christian countries is owing to the stimulus and ferment that Jesus Christ brought. If you want to see how true it is that men without Him sit in the darkness, go to heathen lands, and see the stagnation, the torpor, there.

Now, dear brethren, all this is true about us, in the measure in which we do not participate by faith and love, welcoming Him into our hearts in the illumination that Jesus Christ brings. And what I want to do is to lay upon the hearts and consciences of each of us here this thought, that the solemn, tragic picture of my text is the picture of me, separate from Christ, however I may try to conceal it from myself, and to mask it from other people by busying myself with inferior knowledges, by avoiding to listen to the answer that conscience gives to the question as to my moral character, and by befooling myself with noisy joys and tumultuous pleasures, in which there is no pleasure.

**II. Now, note secondly, the dayspring, or dawn.**

My text, in the part on which I have just been speaking, links itself with ancient Messianic prophecy, and this expression, the dayspring from on high. also links itself with other prophecies of the same sort. Almost the last word of prophecy before the four centuries of silence which Mary and Zacharias broke, was, Unto you that fear His name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His beams. There can be little doubt, I think, that the allusion of my text is to these all but the last words of the prophet Malachi. For that final chapter of the Old Testament colours the song both of Mary and of Zacharias. And it is to be observed that the Greek translation of the Hebrew uses the same verb, of which the cognate noun is here employed, for the rising of the Sun of Righteousness. The picturesque old English word dayspringmeans neither more nor less than sunrising. And it is here used practically as a name for Jesus Christ, who is Himself the Sun, represented as rising over a darkened earth, and yet, with a singular neglect of the propriety of the metaphor, as descending from on high, not to shine on us from the sky, but to visit uson earth.

Jesus Christ Himself, over and over again, said by implication, and more than once by direct claim, I am the Light of the world. And my text is the anticipation, perhaps from lips that did not fully understand the whole significance of the prophecy which they spoke, of these later declarations. I have said that the darkness is the emblem of three baleful things, of the converse of which light is the symbol. As the darkness speaks to us of ignorance, so Christ, as the Sun illumines us with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. For doubt we have blessed certainty, for a far-off God we have the knowledge of God close at hand. For an impassive will or a stony-eyed fate we have the knowledge (and not only the wistful yearning after the knowledge) of a loving heart, warm and throbbing. Our God is no unemotional abstraction, but a living Person who can love, who can pity, and we are speaking more than poetry when we say, God is compassion, and compassion is God. This we know because He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. And the solid certainty of a loving God, tender, pitying, mighty to help, quick to hear, ready to forgive, waiting to bless, is borne into our hearts, and comes there, sweet as the sunshine, when we turn ourselves to the light of Christ.

In like manner the darkness, born of our own sin, which wraps our hearts, and shuts out so much that is fair and sweet and strong, will pass away if we turn ourselves to Him. His light pouring into our souls will hurt the eye at first, but it will hurt to cure. The darkness of sin and alienation will pass, and the true light will shine.

The darkness of sorrow--well! it will not cease, but He will smooth the raven down of darkness till it smiles, and He will bring into our griefs such a spirit of quiet submission as that they shall change into a solemn scorn of ills, and be almost like gladnesses. Peace, which is better than exuberant delight, will come to quiet the sorrow of the soul that trusts in Jesus Christ. The day which is knowledge, purity, gladsomeness, the cheerful day will be ours if we hold by Him. We are all the children of the light and of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness.

Brother, it is possible to grope at noontide as in the dark, and in all the blaze of Christ's revelation still to be left in the Cimmerian folds of midnight gloom. You can shut your eyes to the sunshine; have you opened your hearts to its coming?

I cannot dwell (your time will not allow of it) upon the other points connected with this description of the day spring, except just to point out in passing the singular force and depth of the words--which I suppose are more forcible and deep than he who spoke them understood at the time that visitation was described. The dayspring is from on high. This Sun has come down on to the earth. It has not risen on a far-off horizon, but it has come down and visited us, and walks among us. This Sun, our life-star, hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar. For He that rises upon us as the Light of life, hath descended from the heavens, and was, before He appeared amongst men.

And His coming is a divine visitation. The word here hath visited us(or shall visit us, as the Revised Version varies it), is chiefly employed in the Old Testament to describe the divine acts of self-revelation, and these, mostly redemptive acts. Zacharias employs it in that sense in the earlier portion of the song, where he says that God hath visited and redeemed His people. And so from the use of this word we gather these two thoughts--God comes to us when Christ comes to us, and His coming is wondrous, blessed nearness, and nearness to each of us. What is man that Thou shouldst be mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou shouldst visit him?said the old Psalmist. We say What is man that the Dayspring from on high should come down upon earth, and round His immortal beams, should, as it were, cast the veil and obscuration of a human form; and so walk amongst us, the embodied Light and the Incarnate God?The dayspring from on high hath visited us.

**III. Lastly, note the directing by the light.**

To guide our feet into the way of peace. This Sun stoops to the office of the star that moved before the wise men and hovered over His cradle, and becomes to each individual soul a guide and director. The picture of my text, I suppose, carries us on to the morning, when the benighted travellers catch the first gleams of the rising sun and resume their activity, and there is a cheerful stir through the encampment and the way is open before them once more, and they are ready to walk in it. The force of the metaphor, however, implies more than that, for it speaks to us of the wonder that this universal Light should become the special guide of each individual soul, and should not merely hang in the heavens, to cast the broad radiance of its beams over the whole surface of the earth, but should move before each man, a light unto his feet and a lamp to his path, in special manifestation to him of his duty and his life's pilgrimage.

There is only one way of peace, and that is to follow His beams and to be directed by His preceding us. Then we shall realise the most indispensable of all the conditions of peace--Christ brings you and me the reconciliation which puts us at peace with God, which is the foundation of all other tranquillity. And He will guide docile feet into the way of peace in yet another fashion--in that the following of His example, the cleaving to Him, the holding by His skirts or by His hand, and the treading in His footsteps, is the only way by which the heart can receive the solid satisfaction in which it rests, and the conscience can cease from accusing and stinging. The way of wisdom is a path of pleasantness and a way of peace. Only they who walk in Christ's footsteps have quiet hearts and are at amity with God, in concord with themselves, friends of mankind, and at peace with circumstances. There is no strife within, no strained relations or hostile alienation to God, no gnawing unrest of unsatisfied desires, no pricks of accusing conscience; for the man who puts his hand into Christ's hand, and says, Order Thou my footsteps by Thy word; Where Thou goest I will go, and what Thou commandest I will do.

Brother, put thy hand out from the darkness and clasp His, and the darkness shall be light about thee; and He will fulfil His own promise when He said, I am the Light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life.